

A Shift to Shelters

County probation to place some realignment offenders in homeless shelters



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Pajaro Valley Shelter Services Program Manager Annette Melendrez stands in one of the shelter's dormitories that will now be open to AB 109 participants.

Crime + Criminals - 2500
By J.M. BROWN

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✓ SANTA CRUZ — After serving a year in prison for felony drug offenses, Travis Morton wasn't sure where to go when he was released in February 2012.

The 24-year-old grew up in Salinas, but said most of his family members had moved away and joining them wasn't an option. He eventually moved into his grandmother's home in Capitola, but got back into using drugs because he felt no sense of accountability.

However, since the Santa Cruz County Probation Department increased intervention services this summer as part of a criminal justice realignment program, Morton has turned his life around. He entered a sober living environment with financial assistance from the county and got a job in construction with help from the nonprofit Community Restoration Project.

"It's definitely a goal to move out and be on my own," he said.

Morton's case represents the kind of positive impact probation officials hope to have with felons coming out of prison or jail due to Assembly Bill 109, which shifted the responsibility for nonviolent, nonserious and nonsexual offenders from the state to the counties. The county is contracting with social service providers

SEE AB109 ON A3



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

With help from a county probation intervention program, Travis Morton, 24, now lives in a sober household with other recovering drug addicts.



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Danielle Obinger, with Friends Outside, is working with AB 109 clients.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Bonnie Sultan is an administrative analyst with the county Probation Department working with AB 109 clients.

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to conduct a host of interventions, including transitional housing, substance abuse treatment and job skills training designed to keep them from reoffending.

But a small part of the Probation Department's intervention plans is proving controversial: housing some of the offenders in local shelters for varying amounts of time.

Santa Cruz County's Community Corrections Partnership overseeing \$5.2 million received annually by the state to implement AB 109 has set aside nearly \$1.5 million of the funding to contract with 15 nonprofit and government agencies. The largest share of the intervention funding, \$581,000, will go for substance abuse treatment, which includes paying rent at sober living environments such as the \$475 monthly cost of Morton's room.

But the second-largest share, \$143,000, will go toward paying the Homeless Services Center and River Street Shelter in Santa Cruz and Pajaro Valley Shelter Services in Watsonville for the use of up to 30 total beds each year. All of the beds provided for AB 109 at any given time will be in the Santa Cruz shelters, except for three in Watsonville.

The number of AB 109 beds is small compared to the 255 total AB 109 cases managed so far by probation, but for those who get the housing, it will be critical because the lack of housing can contribute greatly to recidivism, probation officials said.

"If there is no access to stable housing, how am I going to get them to be successful in a drug treatment program?" asked Andrew Davis, senior departmental administrative analyst for the Santa Cruz County Probation Department. "How do they get their GED if they are living under a bridge?"

The state's recidivism rate for parolees returning to prison has been 75 percent within three years, but it's too early to know the widespread impact of AB 109. However, probation officials report that just two of the county's 255 AB 109 participants have been sent back to prison as a result of reoffending during the 16 months the realignment law has been in effect.

The county will use the majority of AB 109 funding

for corrections and probation programs, but Davis said funding interventions is "the wisest use of public resources." He says other counties have used state realignment money primarily to expand jails.

"We came into realignment really ready to do business in a different way," he said.

The realignment law, designed to reduce crowding in state prisons, went into effect in October 2011 but county staffing and programming wasn't in place until the summer of 2012 to implement intervention services. Since then, the county has placed 24 participants in sober living environments and five in shelters — all supervised by probation officers.

SHELTERS A CONCERN

The notion of placing known felons — even those classified as not serious — into shelters is being met with resistance.

"The housing has to have all the right support system to it that removes them from the elements that would cause recidivism," Santa Cruz Vice Mayor Lynn Robinson said of the Homeless Services Center. "I do have some concerns about that being the right environment."

Last year, Robinson joined two other City Council members and the center's director in announcing a number of measures they wanted to put in place after a felon staying at the center stabbed a woman to death in broad daylight. The alleged killer had been released from a state mental health care facility due to a state corrections error.

One of measures called for no increase in homeless services in Santa Cruz, a move designed to encourage the county and its three other cities to share more of the burden. Santa Cruz gives \$168,000 in annual funding to the center.

"Given that there would be a new source of funding, it would make me reconsider the funding the city provides," Robinson said of the AB 109 money. "AB 109 is with us now and the entire county needs to step up and meet the need, not just the city of Santa Cruz."

Analia Cube, co-founder of the citizens' group Take Back Santa Cruz, said placing offenders at the center could exacerbate drug dealing and other problems in the neighborhood.

"I feel like once again the

county is willing to fund something in the city of Santa Cruz if it's going to be something they don't want in any other city," Cube said. "That is the answer? To dump criminals back into city of Santa Cruz?"

Watsonville City Councilman Felipe Hernandez, in whose district Pajaro Valley Shelter Services is located, said his city doesn't have the funding to take on a greater share of services for the homeless. But he said he is not concerned about shelters helping AB 109 offenders.

"My bigger concern is if they don't have somewhere to stay," Hernandez said.

Santa Cruz City Councilman Don Lane, a member of the Homeless Services Center board, said the AB 109 partnership doesn't create new services in Santa Cruz and could actually improve community safety by providing a layer of supervision that doesn't exist now.

"These are existing beds; it's not that there is new homeless sheltering going on there than wasn't already in place," he said. "To me, there is a fear of where ex-offenders are going. I'm not trying to minimize that, but they are already in our community."

In an email to the Sentinel, the center's executive director, Monica Martinez, would only say: "The Homeless Services Center was approached to be a part of the Community Corrections Partnership because transitional housing is a vital wedge in effective public safety delivery. Research and best practices show that transitional housing serves as a crucial stepping stone toward self-sufficiency and is proven to improve public safety and decrease recidivism."

Martinez declined to provide details about how the program would be implemented at the center, leaving it unclear about whether staff and clients will be notified when an AB 109 person is staying at the center.

Claudia Brown, who chairs the center's board, said she didn't know how it would be implemented but is hopeful the program won't have any negative impacts on the organization considering it is designed to be a cost-effective, safe way to manage offenders by providing support services.

"We're talking about probation officers who I'm pretty sure are good at their jobs and we're also talking about really professional staff at the center, case workers and security," she said. "It's

not like we don't deal with troubled people anyway. That is the nature of homelessness."

HOW IT WILL WORK

Bonnie Sultan, an administrative analyst with Santa Cruz County probation, said the community has nothing to fear with AB 109 offenders because they will be supervised by officers whereas other people at the shelter who also may have a criminal past are not.

"It's important that everyone know we are not putting someone at risk for violence in any kind of setting," Sultan said. "What we are getting here is not only supervision where there wasn't any before, but expert supervision where there was none before. The community can take a lot of solace in that."

Watsonville Police Chief Manny Solano said he supports programs that help offenders re-enter society and doesn't anticipate AB 109 offenders will pose a danger to shelter clients or other members of the community. But, he acknowledges, there are no guarantees.

"I would never say it couldn't happen," he said. "Anytime you're dealing with a high-risk population, that is something that is very unpredictable. We are going to do our best to protect our community."

Probation officials said officers assess an offender's risk before they leave prison or jail to determine whether providing housing is the best kind of intervention. Officials

said intense case management by officers and social service providers on the outside will identify when someone is headed down the wrong path.

Davis said probationers will not be placed ahead of others at shelters if there is a waiting list. He said he will work with probation officers to ensure there is a plan for more permanent housing before AB 109 participants reach the maximum days allowed in shelters.

He said the cost to house former offenders in shelters is far less than in state prison, which costs about \$143 per day, or County Jail, at \$70 per day. He said shelters would be paid about \$20 per day to take in AB 109 clients.

The county has budgeted \$90,000 for the Homeless Services Center to house AB 109 offenders in the Page Smith House and Paul Lee Loft. Page Smith has 40 beds and is an 18-month sober living environment. There are 46 beds at the Paul Lee Loft, which is a 30-day shelter. Davis said participants will not stay at the center's emergency or family shelters.

The remaining AB 109 funding set aside for shelters would be given to the River Street Shelter — also on the Homeless Services Center campus but run by Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center — and Pajaro Valley Shelter Services. They will receive \$38,000 and \$15,000, respectively.

Kimberly Ferm, executive director of Pajaro Valley

Shelter Services, a 31-bed emergency shelter for women only, said having up to three AB 109 clients at a time is "right in line with exactly what we do" in helping single women, some with children, transition out of homelessness and save up to 90 percent of their income for security deposits and other costs associated with getting permanent housing. She said a client's AB 109 status would not be disclosed to other residents as part of the shelter's confidentiality rules.

The county's help with primary needs doesn't stop with housing. The Friends Outside organization works with AB 109 offenders as they re-enter society, helping them access to food stamps and other benefits, email and education opportunities. Friends Outside Program Director Danielle Obinger said, "We are working with them very intensively every step of the way."

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